

**Webster [*née* Bevan], Nesta Helen (1875–1960)**, conspiracy theorist, was born on 14 August 1875 at Trent Park, Enfield, Middlesex, the ninth daughter and last of sixteen children of Robert Cooper Lee Bevan (1809–1890), banker, by whose second wife, Emma Frances (1827–1909), she was the sixth daughter and ninth child. Her maternal grandfather was Philip Shuttleworth, who had been successively warden of New College, Oxford, and bishop of Chichester. Robert Bevan was for most of his active life a director of the family bank, Barclay, Bevan & Co. (later Barclay's Bank). The family lived at Trent Park, Middlesex, at Fosbury Manor, Wiltshire, and at 25 Princes Gate, London (and, because of Robert Bevan's health, at a villa in Cannes in the winter months).

Shortly before Nesta's birth her mother had joined the Plymouth Brethren, and the atmosphere at home tended to be somewhat stifling, despite Nesta's deep affection for her ageing father. He died in 1890; Trent Park and Fosbury Manor passed to Nesta's half-brother Frank, and she and her mother went to live abroad, in Cannes and Switzerland.

Nesta's brothers Anthony Ashley Bevan and Edwyn Robert Bevan both became distinguished scholars, in Cambridge and Oxford respectively. The Websters did not believe in formal schooling for girls and Nesta was educated privately by a succession of governesses, apart from one disastrous year at a school called Brownhill Court, near Stroud. In 1894, however, she enrolled at Westfield College, London, where she found the work for matriculation too demanding but stayed on as a general student. Dogged by ill health, she left in 1896.

Owing to an inheritance from her father Nesta now had considerable independent means. Between 1899 and 1902 she undertook two round-the-world trips, on the second of which, in India, she met Arthur Templer Webster (1865–1942), district officer of the United Provinces region, who was the son of Henry Benny Webster, of the Bengal civil service. They married in London on 14 May 1904. They had two daughters and for most of their married life they lived at 84 Cadogan Place, Chelsea, London.

On a visit to Switzerland in 1910 Nesta Webster had an experience that strongly affected her future activities. Reading the letters of the comtesse de Sabran, written at the time of the French Revolution, she became convinced that she herself was a reincarnation of someone who had lived in that period; previous premonitions when passing through Paris (where she had seen the rue St Honoré 'running with blood') now became clear. She set about writing on the French Revolution, and in 1916 produced *The Chevalier de Boufflers*. This was followed, in 1919, by *The French Revolution: a Study in Democracy*, in which she developed a wide-ranging conspiracy theory of history, based on the abiding influence of 'Illuminated Freemasonry' behind all revolutionary activities. The lack of serious reviews of this book proved to her that the conspiracy was still alive.

Amid the post-war furore caused by the 'discovery' of *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* Webster became convinced that Jews were the main force behind this international conspiracy. Even after *Protocols* was shown to be a forgery she asserted that it had nevertheless shown of what the Jews were capable. With her book *World Revolution: the Plot Against Civilization* (1921) she developed the theory of a perennial 'Judaeo-Masonic' plot based on international finance, of which the latest manifestation had been the Bolshevik revolution. She was soon taken up by the antisemitic eighth duke of Northumberland (Alan Ian Percy), to whose newspaper, *The Patriot*, she contributed for the next quarter of a century and whose Boswell publishing house published most of her subsequent books, the best-known being *Secret Societies and Subversive Movements* (1924) and *The Socialist Network* (1926). In the mid-1920s she joined Rotha Lintorn-Orman's 'British Fascisti', eventually serving on their grand council.

By the 1930s Webster's publications had brought her to the attention of many like-minded people in Britain, including members of the antisemitic 'patriotic societies', such as Captain Ramsay and Admiral Sir Barry Domville. Her attitudes were, like Ramsay's, intimately bound up with her Christian beliefs, with 'Judaeo Bolshevism' being seen as plotting the undermining of Christianity. Her former, resolute anti-Germanism was dispelled by the advent of Hitler, whose mission she saw as being 'to cleanse Germany of the Jewish influence'. In 1938 Domville recruited her to his pro-Nazi movement, *The Link*. A series of articles in *The Patriot* in 1938-9, entitled 'Germany and England', outlined her admiration for the new German state. Interestingly in this same period her brother Edwyn Bevan was a vocal proponent of academic sanctions against Nazi Germany because of its attitude to the Jews. It took the Nazi-Soviet pact of August 1939 to turn her against Hitler, whom she now saw as a dupe of the very forces against which he had

appeared to be a bulwark. In 1939–40 she wrote a further 'Germany and England' series of articles for *The Patriot*, modifying her earlier views.

Nesta Webster's husband, Arthur, died in 1942. In 1949 she published the first volume of her autobiography, *Spacious Days*, which covered merely the period to 1919. (The manuscript of the second volume, *Crowded Hours*, was stolen—leading of course to further conspiracy theories on the part of her admirers.) In her final years, she spent much time preparing, with Anthony Gittens, a revised edition of *World Revolution*, which dealt with the post-war spread of communism. This appeared in 1971, after her death. She died of a heart condition on 7 May 1960, in her flat at 66 Cadogan Place, Chelsea, London.

Since Webster's death a great industry relating to her works has developed. Her message has been taken up by assorted conspiracy theorists and antisemites all over the world; this has been much facilitated by the internet, where she features in hundreds of entries, including the book lists of a wide variety of extremist organizations in the United States. This entirely unremarkable woman has proved to be a lasting example of the fact that the most extreme and unreal views, even when naïvely expressed, can find a ready response in those political areas that thrive on the myth of a world plot.

#### RICHARD GRIFFITHS

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